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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1246
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2302
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000355

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL FEARS CHAOS OR COMPROMISE WITH SYRIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former President and head of the Phalange party Amine Gemayel told the Charge he is afraid of two potential outcomes to the political impasse: chaos or compromise. He equates a compromise with the opposition as a compromise between Lebanese sovereignty and Syrian hegemony. Recapping his recent visits to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, he acknowledged that he no longer has hope for the Arab League initiative, and believes that Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa was unlikely to return to Beirut. Referring to a Hizballah plan to install Shia outposts throughout Lebanon, Gemayel described major land purchases by Hizballah in which it sets up blockades against Christians.

2. (C) Gemayel supports Lebanon sending a delegation to the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus and also reshuffling the cabinet, but acknowledged that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora is reluctant to act on the latter. He proposed soliciting Libya and Egypt for support in advance of the summit. Gemayel expressed his doubt that the March 2009 legislative elections will occur on time, due to lack of agreement on electoral reform. End summary.

3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met with former President and Phalange party head Amine Gemayel on March 7, upon his return from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

SAUDI ARABIA DEDICATED; UAE CAUTIOUS

4. (C) Gemayel appreciated Saudi Arabian King Abdullah's response to Lebanon's political impasse, saying the King is dedicated and aware of the Syrian and Iranian threats. Expressing his concern regarding UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah's position, Gemayel said the UAE FM is cautious, anxious, does not understand the situation, and does not know what to do. Gemayel said the UAE is "hating Syria but flirting with it at the same time." According to Gemayel, the UAE has a vested interest in helping Lebanon, citing the 100,000 Lebanese living in Dubai, and raising the issue of its three islands currently occupied by Iran. The Qataris are complicating the situation, he continued, adding that Lebanon had appealed to Qatar for contributions to the Special Tribunal, to no avail.

FEARING CHAOS OR COMPROMISE

15. (C) There is a deadlock on the Arab League initiative, reported Gemayel, prompting him to declare the initiative dead. He added that Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa was unlikely to return to Beirut, since he has no reason to come.

16. (C) Gemayel said he is afraid of two potential outcomes: chaos or compromise. If March 14 accepts a compromise with the opposition, Gemayel remarked, it falls into a trap. Emphasizing that he has no problem with the idea of compromise among Lebanese, Gemayel explained that a compromise with the opposition translates to a compromise with Syria. "It is a compromise between Lebanese sovereignty and Syrian hegemony," he stated. The opposition is dealing on behalf of Syria, Gemayel argued, giving the analogy in French of the iron pot competing with the earthen pot - the iron pot wins.

LINKING SHIA OUTPOSTS IN LEBANON

17. (C) Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri is a tool of Hizballah, Gemayel said, and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is "the cherry on top." Gemayel backed his statement up saying Hizballah buys off MP and landowner Elie Skaff, whose parliamentary bloc is allied with Aoun's, by paying three times the going rate for property. According to Gemayel, Skaff has been selling his family-owned land to Hizballah, in what Gemayel dubbed a Syrian plan to install Shia outposts throughout the country.

18. (C) Gemayel reported that Syria controls large parts of the Biga' Valley, building training camps and linking remote

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Shia communities through its purchases. This plan is widespread, he continued, saying that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt is similarly concerned about his Druze constituents being overrun in the Shouf. Gemayel mentioned Jbeil Rihane as a major Hizballah stronghold as well as Jezzine, where there are areas where Hizballah requires permits and forbids Christians from entering. "The crippling annexation by Hizballah of land is the same crippling Hizballah is imposing on Lebanon in the political sphere," he said.

RESHUFFLE THE CABINET, REFORM ELECTORAL LAW

19. (C) Gemayel supports reshuffling the cabinet, such as the Finance and Interior ministers, but said that when he spoke to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, the PM was reluctant, presumably because he does not want to lose his influence or his technocrats. Gemayel lamented that if Siniora is not obligated to find a compromise, he won't. This feeds into Aoun's popularity, continued Gemayel, because Aoun can point to Christians as lacking influence in the government.

110. (C) On electoral reform, Gemayel said he likes the principle of small qadas (districts), but favors a reshuffling of the current districts. In the south, Gemayel illustrated, the Christians aren't represented because if they make up ten percent of the population, they are unable to elect a representative of their choosing. Gemayel expressed his lack of confidence that there would be agreement on electoral reform before the March 2009 legislative elections.

U.S. NEEDS DIPLOMACY WITH MUSCLES

111. (C) It is the U.S. that has to lead the efforts to bolster Lebanon, urged Gemayel, with the support of Saudi Arabia. The U.S. needs to use "diplomacy with muscles, or

nothing at all," he stated with conviction. Gemayel said that the U.S. has been sending mixed messages recently, referring to the presence of the U.S. naval vessels off the coast of Lebanon occurring the same week that Iranian President Ahmadinejad visited the Green Zone in Iraq, in what was perceived by some as the U.S. bowing to Iran. Gemayel called the USS Cole "a bluff," and "bluffs are ineffective with Syria," in his opinion.

REACHING OUT TO LIBYA AND EGYPT?

¶12. (C) Noting that in the past he had a good relationship with Libyan ruler Mu'amar Qadafi, Gemayel wondered if it would be a good idea to reach out to Qadafi, prior to the Arab League summit, since Libya is a member of the UN Security Council. He added that Libya also exercises influence on Burkina Faso, another member of the Security Council, and that would make two votes in Lebanon's favor. He solicited the Charge's opinion and mentioned that he would soon be meeting Saudi Ambassador Abdel Aziz Khoja, and would check with him, since Saudi Arabia's relationship with Libya is not good. Gemayel also is considering going to Egypt in the near future to enlist support for Lebanon.

¶13. (C) On Lebanese participation in the summit, Gemayel is not opposed to sending a delegation, and did not have strong opinions as to who should represent Lebanon, believing that Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad or Justice Minister Charles Rizk would be good options. (Comment: Others are talking about Gemayel himself, as a former president of Lebanon, as a possibility for Arab League summit attendance. End comment.)

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